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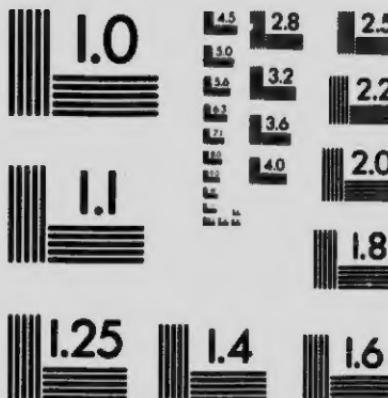


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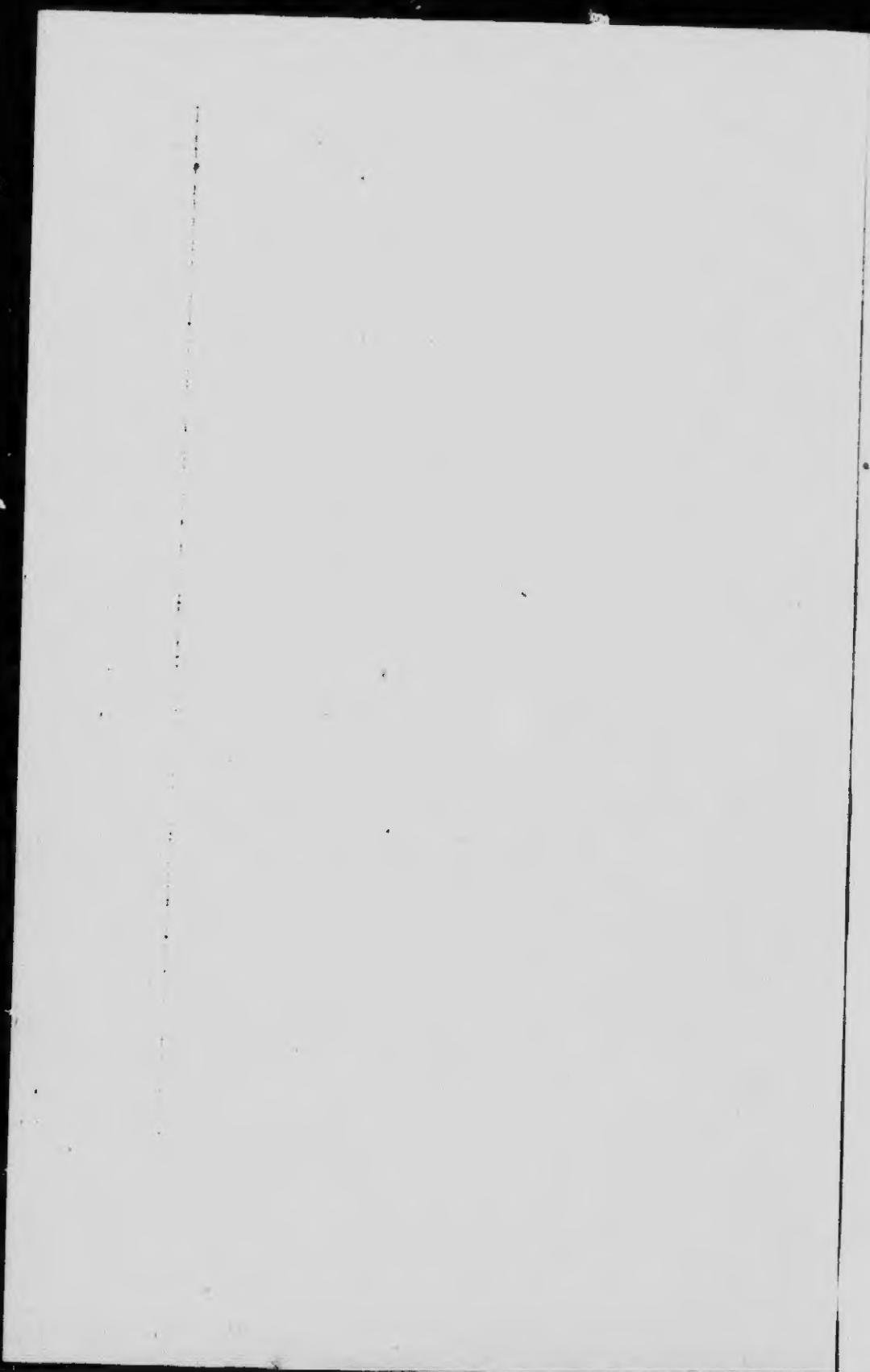
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A FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

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BY

CHARLES W. GORDON

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THE village schoolhouse was packed to the door. Over the crowded forms there fell a murky light from the smoky swinging lamp that left dark unexplored depths in the corners of the room. On the walls hung dilapidated maps at angles suggesting the interior of a ship's cabin during a storm, or a party of revellers returning homeward, after the night before, gravely hilarious. Behind the platform a blackboard, cracked into irregular spaces, preserved the mental processes of the pupils during their working hours, and in sharp contrast to these the terribly depressing perfection of the teacher's exemplar in penmanship, which reminded the self-complacent slacker that "Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom."

It was an evangelistic meeting. Behind the table, his face illumined by the lamp thereon, stood a man turning over the leaves of a hymn book. His aspect suggested a soul, gentle, mild and somewhat abstracted from its material environment. The lofty forehead gave promise of an idealism capable of high courage, indeed of sacrifice—a promise, however, belied somewhat by an irresolute chin partly hidden by a straggling beard. But the face was sincere and tenderly human. At his side upon the platform sat his wife behind a little portable organ, her face equally gentle, sincere and irresolute.

The assembly—with the extraordinary patience that characterizes public assemblies—waited for the opening of the meeting, following with attentive eyes the vague and trifling movements of the man at the table. Occasionally there was a rumble of deep voices in conversation and in the dark corners subdued laughter—while on the front benches the animated and giggling whispering of three little girls tended to relieve the hour from an almost superhuman gravity.

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At length, with a sudden acquisition of resolution, the evangelist glanced at his watch, rose, and catching up a bundle of hymn books from the table, thrust them with unnecessary energy into the hands of a boy who sat on the side bench beside his mother. The boy was Lawrence Gwynne.

"Take these," said the man, "and distribute them, please."

Lawrence, taken thus by surprise, paled, then flushed a quick red. He glanced up at his mother and at her slight nod took the books and distributed them among the audience on one side of the room while the evangelist took the other. As the lad passed from bench to bench with his books he was greeted with jocular and slightly jeering remarks in undertone by the younger members of the company, which had the effect of obviously increasing the ineptitude of his thin, nervous fingers, but could not quite dispel the whimsical smile that lingered about the corners of his mouth and glanced from the corners of his grey-blue eyes.

The meeting opened with the singing of a popular hymn which carried a refrain catchy enough but running to doggerel. Another hymn followed and another. Then abruptly the evangelist announced :

"Now we shall have a truly great hymn, a hymn you must sing in a truly great way, in what we call the grand style, number three hundred and sixty-seven."

Then in a voice, deep, thrilling, vibrant with a noble emotion, he read the words :

"When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride."

They sang the verse, and when they had finished he stood looking at them in silence for a moment or two, then announced solemnly :

"Friends, that will not do for this hymn. Sing it with your hearts. Listen to me."

Then he sang a verse in a deep, strong baritone.

"Now try."

Timidly they obeyed him.

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"No, no, not at all," he shouted at them. "Listen."

Again with exquisitely distinct articulation and in a tone rich in emotion and carrying in it the noble, penetrating pathos of the great work in which is embodied the passion of that heart subduing world tragedy. He would not let them try it again, but alone sang the hymn to the end. By the spell of his voice he had gripped them by the heart. The giggling girls in the front seat sat gazing at him with open mouths and lifted eyes. From every corner of the room faces once dull were filled with a great expectant look.

"You will never sing those words as you should," he cried, "until you know and feel the glory of that wondrous cross. Never, never, never." His voice rose in a passionate *crescendo*.

After he had finished singing the last great verse, he let his eyes wander over the benches until they rested upon the face of the lad on the side bench near him.

"Aha, boy," he cried. "You can sing those words. Try that last verse."

The boy stared, fascinated, at him.

"Sing the last verse, boy," commanded the evangelist, "sing."

As if impelled by another will than his own, the boy slowly, with his eyes still fastened on the man's face, threw back his head and began to sing. His voice rose, full, strong, in a quaint imitation in method of articulation and in voice production of the evangelist himself. At the third line of the verse the evangelist joined in great massive tones, beating time vigorously in a *rallentando*.

"Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."

The effect was a great emotional climax, the spiritual atmosphere was charged with fervour. The people sat rigid, fixed in their places, incapable of motion, until released by the invitation of the leader, "Let us pray." The boy seemed to wake as from a sleep, glanced at his mother, then at the faces of the people in the room, sat down, and quickly covered his face with his hands and so remained during the prayer.

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The dramatic effect of the singing was gradually dispelled in the prayer and in a Scripture reading which followed. By the time the leader was about to begin his address, the people had almost relapsed into their normal mental and spiritual condition of benevolent neutrality. A second time a text was announced, when abruptly the door opened and up the aisle, with portentous impressiveness as of a stately ocean liner coming to berth, a man advanced whose presence seemed to fill the room and give it the feeling of being unpleasantly crowded. A buzz went through the seats. "The Rector! The Rector!" The evangelist gazed upon the approaching form and stood as if incapable of proceeding until this impressive personage should come to rest. Deliberately the Rector advanced to the side bench upon which Larry and his mother were seated, and slowly swinging into position, calmly viewed the man upon the platform, the woman at the organ, the audience filling the room and then definitely came to anchor upon the bench.

The preacher waited until this manœuvre had been successfully accomplished, coughed nervously, made as if to move in the direction of the important personage on the side bench, hesitated, and finally with an air of embarrassment once more announced his text. At once the Rector was upon his feet.

"Will you pardon me, sir," he began with elaborate politeness. "Do I understand you're a clergyman?"

"Oh, no, sir," replied the evangelist. "just a plain preacher."

"You are not in any Holy Orders then?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Are you an ordained or accredited minister of any of the—ah—dissenting bodies?"

"Not exactly, sir."

"Then, sir," demanded the Rector, "may I ask by what authority you presume to exercise the functions of the holy ministry and in my parish?"

"Well—really—sir, I do not know why I—"

"Then, sir, let me tell you this will not be permitted," said the Rector sternly. "There are regularly ordained and accredited ministers of the Church and of all religious

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bodies represented in this neighbourhood, and your ministrations are not required."

"But surely, sir," said the evangelist hurriedly, as if anxious to get in a word, "I may be permitted in this free country to preach the Gospel."

"Sir, there are regularly ordained and approved ministers of the Gospel who are quite capable of performing this duty. I won't have it, sir. I must protect these people from unlicensed, unregulated—ah—persons, of whose character and antecedents we have no knowledge. Pray, sir," cried the Rector, taking a step toward the man on the platform, "whom do you represent?"

The evangelist drew himself up quietly and said, "My Lord and Master, sir. May I ask whom do you represent?"

It was a deadly thrust. For the first time during the encounter the Rector palpably gave ground.

"Eh? Ah—sir—I—ah—ahem—my standing in this community is perfectly assured as an ordained clergyman of the Church of England in Canada. Have you any organization or church, any organised Christ body to which you adhere and to which you are responsible?"

"Yes."

"What is that body?"

"The Church of Christ—the body of believers."

"Is that an organized body with ordained ministers and holy sacraments?"

"We do not believe in a paid ministry with special privileges and powers," said the evangelist. "We believe that every disciple has a right to preach the glorious Gospel."

"Ah, then you receive no support from any source in this ministry of yours?"

The evangelist hesitated. "I receive no salary, sir."

"No support?"

"I receive no regular salary," reiterated the evangelist.

"Do not quibble, sir," said the Rector sternly. "Do you receive any financial support from any source whatever in your mission about the country?"

"I receive—" began the evangelist.

"Do you or do you not?" thundered the Rector.

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"I was about to say that my expenses are paid by my society."

"Thank you, no more need be said. These people can judge for themselves."

"I am willing that they should judge, but I remind you that there is another Judge."

"Yes, sir," replied the Rector with portentous solemnity, "there is, before whom both you and I must stand."

"And now then," said the evangelist, taking up the Bible, "we may proceed with our meeting."

"No, sir," replied the Rector, stepping upon the platform. "I will not permit it."

"You have no right to—"

"I have every right to protect this community from heretical and disingenuous, not to say dishonest, persons."

"You call me dishonest?"

"I said disingenuous."

The evangelist turned toward the audience. "I protest against this intrusion upon this meeting. I appeal to the audience for British fair play."

Murmurs were heard from the audience and subdued signs of approval. The Rector glanced upon the people.

"Fair play," he cried, "you will get as will any man who appears properly accredited and properly qualified to proclaim the Gospel, but in the name of this Christian community, I will prevent the exploitation of an unwary and trusting people."

"Liberty of speech!" called a voice from a dark corner.

"Liberty of speech," roared the Rector. "Who of you wants liberty of speech? Let him stand forth."

There followed a strained and breathless silence. The champion of free speech retreated behind his discretion.

"Ah, I thought so," said the Rector in grim contempt.

But even as he spoke a quiet voice invaded the tense silence like a bell in a quiet night. It was Mrs. Gwynne, her slight girlish figure standing quietly erect, her face glowing as with an inner light, her eyes resting in calm fearlessness upon the Rector's heated countenance.

"Sir," she said, "my conscience will not permit me to sit in silence in the presence of what I feel to be an infringement of the rights of free people. I venture very

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humly to protest against this injustice, and to say that this gentleman has a right to be heard."

An even more intense silence fell upon the people. The Rector stood speechless, gazing upon the little woman who had thus broken every tradition of the community in lifting her voice in a public assembly and who had dared to challenge the authority of one who for nearly twenty years had been recognized as the autocrat of the village and of the whole countryside. But the Rector was an alert and gallant fighter. He quickly recovered his poise.

"If Mrs. Gwynne, our good friend and neighbour, desires to address this meeting," he said with a courteous and elaborate bow, "and I am sure by training and tradition she is quite capable of doing so, I am confident that all of us will be delighted to listen to her. But the question in hand is not quite so simple as she imagines. It is—"

"Liberty of speech," said the voice again from the dark corner.

The Rector wheeled fiercely in the direction from which the interruption came.

"Who speaks?" he cried; "why does he shrink into the darkness? Let him come forth."

Again discretion held the interrupter silent.

"As for you—you, sir," continued the Rector, turning upon the evangelist, "if you desire—"

But at this point there was a sudden commotion from the opposite side of the room. A quaint dwarfish figure, crippled, but full of vigour, stumped up to the platform.

"My son," he said, grandly waving the Rector to one side, "allow me, my son. You have done well. Now I shall deal with this gentleman."

The owner of the misshapen body had a noble head, a face marked with intellectual quality, but the glitter in the large blue eye told the same tale of mental anarchy. Startled and astonished the evangelist backed away from the extraordinary creature that continued to advance upon him.

"Sir," cried the dwarf, "by what right do you proclaim the divine message to your fellowmen? Have you known the cross, have you felt the piercing crown, do you

bear upon your body the mark of the spear?" At this with a swift upward hitch of his shirt, the dwarf exposed his bare side. The evangelist continued to back away from his new assailant, who continued vigorously to follow him up. The youngsters in the crowd broke into laughter. The scene passed swiftly from tragedy to farce. At this point the Rector interposed.

"Come, come, John," he said, laying a firm, but gentle, hand upon the dwarf's shoulder. "That will do now. He is perfectly harmless, sir," he said, addressing the evangelist. Then turning to the audience, "I think we may dismiss this meeting," and, raising his hands, he pronounced the benediction, and the people dispersed in disorder.

With a strained "Good-night, sir," to the evangelist and a courteous bow to Mrs. Gwynne, the Rector followed the people, leaving the evangelist and his wife behind packing up their hymn books and organ, their faces only too clearly showing the distress which they felt. Mrs. Gwynne moved toward them.

"I am truly grieved," she said, addressing the evangelist, "that you were not given an opportunity to deliver your message."

"What a terrible creature that is," he exclaimed in a tone indicating nervous anxiety.

"Oh, you mean poor John?" said Mrs. Gwynne. "The poor man is quite harmless. He became excited with the unusual character of the meeting. He will disturb you no more."

"I fear it is useless," said the evangelist. "I cannot continue in the face of this opposition."

"It may be difficult, but not useless," replied Mrs. Gwynne, the light of battle glowing in her grey eyes.

"Ah, I do not know. It may not be wise to stir up bad feeling in a community, to bring the name of religion into disrepute by strife. But," he continued, offering his hand, "let me thank you warmly for your sympathy. It was spendidly courageous of you. Do you—do you attend his church?"

"Yes, we worship with the Episcopal Church. I am a Friend myself."

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"Ah, then it was a splendidly courageous act. I honour you for it."

"But you will continue your mission?" she replied earnestly.

"Alas, I can hardly see how the mission can be continued. There seems to be no opening."

Mrs. Gwynne apparently lost interest. "Good-bye," she said simply, shaking hands with them both and without further words left the room with her boy. For some distance they walked together along the dark road in silence. Then in an awed voice the boy said:

"How could you do it, mother? You were not a bit afraid."

"Afraid of what, the Rector?"

"No, not the Rector—but to speak up that way before all the people."

"It was hard to speak," said his mother, "very hard, but it was harder to keep silent. It did not seem right."

The boy's heart swelled with a new pride in his mother. "Oh, mother," he said, "you were splendid. You were like a soldier standing there. You were like the martyrs in my book."

"Oh, no, no, my boy."

"I tell you yes, mother, I was proud of you."

The thrilling passion in the little boy's voice went to his mother's heart. "Were you, my boy?" she said, his voice faltering. "I am glad you were."

Hand in hand they walked along, the boy exulting in restored pride in his mother and in her courage. But a new feeling soon stirred within him. He remembered with a pain intolerable that he had allowed the word of so despicable a creature as Mop Cheatley to shake his faith in his mother's courage. Indignation at the wretched creature who had maligned her, but chiefly a passionate self-contempt that he had allowed himself to doubt her, raged tumultuously in his heart and drove him in a silent fury through the dark until they reached their own gate. Then, as his mother's hand reached toward the latch, the boy abruptly caught her arm in a fierce grip.

"Mother," he burst forth in a passionate declaration of faith, "you're not a coward."

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"A coward?" replied his mother, astonished.

The boy's arms went around her, his head pressed into her bosom. It a voice broken with passionate sobs he poured forth his tale of shame and self-contempt.

"He said you were a Quaker, that the Quakers were cowards, and would never fight, and that you were a coward, and that you would never fight. But you would, mother, wouldn't you? And you're not a real Quaker, are you, mother?"

"A Quaker," said his mother. "Yes, dear, I belong to the Friends, as we call them."

"And they, won't they ever fight?" demanded the boy anxiously.

"They do not believe that fighting with fists, or sticks, or like wild beasts," said his mother, "ever wins anything worth while."

"Never, mother?" cried the boy, anxiety and fear in his tones. "You would fight, you would fight to-night, you would fight the Rector."

"Yes, my boy," said his mother quietly, "that kind of fighting we believe in. Our people have never been afraid to stand up for the right, and to suffer for it too. Remember that, my boy," a certain pride rang out in the mother's voice. She continued, "We must never be afraid to suffer for what we believe to be right. You must never forget that through all your life, Larry." Her voice grew solemn. "You must never, never go back from what you know to be right, even if you have to suffer for it."

"Oh, mother," whispered the boy through his sobs, "I wish I were brave like you."

"No, no, not like me," whispered his mother, putting her face down to his. "You will be much braver than your mother, my boy, oh, very much braver than your mother."

The boy still clung to her as if he feared to let her go. "Oh, mother," he whispered, "do you think I can be brave?"

"Yes, my boy," her voice rang out again confident and clear. "It always makes us brave to know that He bore the cross for us and died rather than betray us."

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There were no more words between them, but the memory of that night never faded from the boys' mind. A new standard of heroism was set up within his soul which he might fail to reach but which he could never lower.